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PLAN OF THE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE FOR HANDLING THE FARM LABOR PROBLEM

BY E. V. WILCOX

Office of Farm Management

With the entrance of the United States into the world war it was anticipated that a temporary shortage of farm labor might occur, requiring special attention by the Department of Agriculture. The duty of handling this problem for the Department was assigned to the Office of Farm Management and a study of the problem was immediately begun. No special appropriations were available for this purpose and it was therefore necessary to take certain members of the staff of the office from their regular work and assign them to states in which the most urgent calls were made for assistance. A general coöperative agreement was at once entered into with the Department of Labor whereby the Department of Agriculture was to make surveys to learn the actual labor needs of farmers and also to learn the possible sources of farm labor in rural communities and in towns up to the size of 10,000 inhabitants, while the Department of Labor undertook to handle as heretofore labor surveys in larger towns and cities.

It was generally realized that a larger number of laborers than is usually the case had been absorbed by the enormous industrial expansion during the previous years of the war and by the great demand for military supplies to be exported to the Allies. Moreover, a considerable number of men, possibly 40,000, had been attracted to Canada as farm laborers by reason of the liberal offers and urgent need of the Canadian government. Furthermore, thousands of Mexicans passed over the international boundary under the impression that they would be forced into military service if they remained in the United States. This exodus of Mexicans was particularly extensive during the summer season and still continues. During November, for example, about 75 Mexicans daily crossed into Mexico over the international bridge at El Paso, Texas, and a similar exodus was taking place at other points along the boundary. Labor agents interested in obtaining laborers for industrial purposes visited portions of the country in which there was a surplus of labor and by the offer of high wages succeeded in inducing many thousands of laborers to leave southern cities, and to a less extent country districts, for employment in northern industrial concerns. Then came the draft for

the national army. Following upon the draft came the call for laborers to construct cantonments and for the increased shipbuilding operations of the federal government. These unusual demands for labor, coupled with the need of an increased food production for ourselves and the allies, made a farm labor problem of large proportions.

The high wages offered for work in industrial concerns and in the construction of cantonments drew large numbers of men away from farms and caused a temporary disturbance in the farm labor situation. This disturbance was for a time quite serious, especially in the immediate neighborhood of cantonments and large industrial enterprises, but a readjustment of conditions is rapidly being reached.

Another factor in the farm labor problem may here be mentioned—a factor of more importance than has commonly been assigned to it. The labor required for essential and fundamental industries had gradually been becoming scarcer, even before the outbreak of the European war, as a result of the enormous development of luxury trades, especially the automobile business. This business had gradually absorbed into its service millions of men used in constructing factories, building machines, repair work, maintenance of garages, driving automobiles, and other kinds of employment connected with the automobile.

There are two main features or phases of the Department program for handling the farm labor situation; namely, to learn the labor needs of every farmer and to develop all possible sources of labor. In order to meet this problem satisfactorily, a suitable organization was the first requirement to be met. The present plan of organization includes the Office of Farm Management in general charge of the program, four Supervising Farm Help Specialists in charge of the northeastern, north-central, southern, and western divisions of the United States, thirty-seven State Farm Help Specialists (for the most part one man in charge of the work in each state but in some instances in charge of a group of two or more states), County Agents or other county men and community leaders or committees. This organization is in active coöperation with the United States Department of Labor, the Extension Service of the Agricultural Colleges, State Councils of Defense, State Commissioners of Agriculture and Labor, and other organizations officially interested in the farm labor problem.

In general the work of the Farm Help Specialists of the Depart-

ment of Agriculture is concerned with the farm side of the problem. These men must devise means of securing accurate and authoritative information regarding the farm labor needs of every farmer in their territory. They must also learn what readjustments of farm labor are possible so as to handle the work in hand. They make surveys of rural communities and small towns to ascertain the prospects of securing for farm work labor not now fully employed for that purpose. The work of the Department of Labor in this connection consists in the extension and even more efficient handling of their system of employment offices in the large cities. At these employment offices thousands of men apply for positions. Many of these men have had previous farm experience and are therefore especially desirable for use in farm operations. In this year's experience in New York State it was found that about 10 per cent of the laborers applying at employment offices had had previous farm experience. It is especially desirable that all such men be sent back to the farm, and an effort is being made to accomplish this result through the active and cordial coöperation of the Department of Labor. In order to bring this result about more methodically, an arrangement has recently been made whereby one of the members of the staff of the Office of Farm Management has been assigned to service in the Department of Labor in order to present the viewpoint of the Department of Agriculture and of the farmer to the men in charge of employment offices, and to make arrangements for selecting for assignment to farm work all experienced men and at the same time to prevent sending to the farmers men who are out of sympathy with farm work, without experience on farms, and therefore unlikely to give satisfactory service.

Thus far the only serious phase of the farm labor problem is concerned with securing a sufficient supply of experienced men. Some of these men have been drawn away from the farm by the economic attraction of higher wages in city industries and the problem before us is how to get some of them back to the farm. Among the miscellaneous applicants in employment offices, for example, are experienced milkers, farm teamsters, and handlers of farm machinery. It is of large importance to sift these men out of the general supply of migratory labor and return them to satisfactory positions on farms, where they are urgently needed.

There are several sources of labor not already fully utilized for farm work. A computation of data obtained in making farm

surveys and in studying the problem of tenancy shows that there are about 700,000 retired farmers in the United States not now occupied with any gainful occupation. The very fact of their being retired farmers indicates that they have been successful in their occupation. They are therefore men with just the qualifications required for directing farm operations and for handling complicated machinery not requiring great physical exertion. Many of these men are of course past middle life, but the majority of them are still capable of doing efficient service on farms and many of them have returned to the farm under the present emergency to add the weight of their experience, counsel, and expert services to the solution of the problem. There are about five million boys in the United States between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one. Many of these boys naturally return to the farm for the summer vacation, some being farmers' sons and others having had more or less experience with farm work. Not all of them, of course, should be expected to take part in farm operations and not all of them will be needed for such work, but there are large numbers of city boys without previous farm experience who, with a little patience on the part of the farmer, may be trained into valuable farm hands. They are naturally alert, quick to learn, and full of energy, and under proper guidance may render a good account of themselves on the farm. In fact the experience of the past year, while varied in the different states, has shown that these boys are a great asset which cannot be overlooked in the consideration of the farm labor problem. Then there is a great crowd of city dwellers who take an annual vacation preferably at outdoor work. Many of these men have taken vacations on farms year after year and are therefore sufficiently expert to be entrusted with nearly all kinds of farm work. Again we have to consider the large number of men now engaged in city industries of various sorts who can be spared for work on the farm during slack periods of business. Women have also taken an important position in farm life, and during the present war emergency a constantly increasing number of women are seeking and obtaining employment on farms either at outdoor work or as help for the farmers' wives. Both as individuals and in camps the women have rendered efficient service at various kinds of farm occupations. The English government has had an extensive and satisfactory experience with women as farm laborers. It has been found desirable to establish training camps for women, not primarily be-

cause they require longer to learn the essential features of farm work than men, but because it was felt that city women should have a preliminary physical training or seasoning in order to prevent unfavorable results from the unusual kind of work. About 150,000 women have been trained in camps in England during the year, and their services have been found to be of high value, as shown by the voluntary reports of farmers with whom they have found employment. Some interest has been awakened in the United States in training camps for women. As an example of such a camp, mention may be made of that at Mt. Kisco, N. Y. This camp was established by private enterprise on an abandoned farm on which all operations were done by girls from Columbia University and the Manhattan Trade Schools. They performed all kinds of farm work, even including haying, with satisfactory results, and were generally employed by farmers in the neighborhood. Many of these farmers of their own initiative reported that the girls were more alert and active than the ordinary farm laborer and that their services would be gladly accepted during the coming year. Incidentally it should be stated that all of the girls were pleased with their experience and hope to have the same opportunity again.

Husking bees have been organized in various towns for the purpose of assisting the neighboring farmers in harvesting and saving their corn. These husking bees are essentially a revival of a pleasant old farm institution which, like so many of the farm operations of a previous generation, combined social activities with industry.

Interest has also been aroused in the passage and enforcement of vagrancy laws and compulsory work laws. This has been the case in Maryland, Wisconsin, West Virginia, and Florida. Such laws have also been enforced locally in a number of the other states. In fact the desirability of compulsory work laws has been generally discussed throughout the country, and a movement is under way to secure the passage of vagrancy laws in various states which do not now have such legislation. The drones and loafers are always with us. They are conspicuous about pool rooms, corner grocery stores, and in other places where the useless members of society congregate. Some of these men apparently cannot be induced to work either by an appeal to patriotism or by an offer of satisfactory wages. It seems necessary therefore for society to protect itself by demanding that those who will not voluntarily work shall be compelled to take part in the necessary

operations of our economic system. An interesting special class of loafers includes the parasitic husbands of cooks and household servants who, in accordance with the long-established traditional system, take home nights sufficient food to support an idle man. This condition is particularly prevalent among the Negroes of the South where the custom has been prevailing since time out of mind. In Florida an attempt has recently been made in one or two communities to interfere with this time-honored custom. An appeal has been made to women's clubs to take a definite stand in the matter and to prevent food from being taken home by their cooks and servants. Considerable progress has been made toward this end and it is hoped that this custom, which makes possible the existence of a class of professional parasites, will be gradually and definitely abandoned.

Several readjustments of labor already on the farms may be made to meet more adequately the present situation. The old custom of exchanging labor among farmers, which has come down from the early days of agriculture, is being extended and utilized on a larger scale than ever. The wide use of the method of exchanging labor makes possible not only the rapid accomplishment of tasks which do not permit of delay but also the doing of work which requires the services of a number of men simultaneously in order to secure the efficient utilization of labor. The custom also permits the better distribution of labor now on farms and the more continuous utilization of their services. Attention has also been called to the possibility of introducing changes in the cropping system in order to utilize labor more fully and more efficiently. In a careful survey of the distribution and use of labor in North Carolina it was found that only about 40 per cent efficiency was obtained during the past cropping season among negro laborers. In Maryland a study of the work performed by farm laborers including both family and hired labor indicated that farmers and their hired help do only about one hundred days work each per year. This is a low grade of efficiency and the situation can obviously be greatly improved by giving more careful attention to the distribution and utilization of the labor already available.

A tabulation of the results obtained from the farm labor survey work of the past crop season indicates quite clearly that the work of producing the necessary food and of carrying on other farm operations can be accomplished by a general speeding up without any additional farm labor. More work can be done with the same

number of laborers. This has been accomplished on thousands of individual farms and the experience of Canada shows that it can be accomplished in a nation as a whole. The Canadian example is one which merits close study and enthusiastic emulation. Canada, with a population of eight million, has sent 500,000 of her young men to France. If we placed a proportionate number of our population in active military service the total would be 6,250,000. Notwithstanding the large army of men which Canada has taken from her population for military service, the Dominion increased all of its essential industrial operations and also greatly increased the export of all important agricultural products. In other words Canada did a great deal more than heretofore and with fewer men. The problem was solved by speeding up and by more efficient distribution and utilization of the available manpower.

Among the numerous suggestions which have been made of methods of solving the farm labor problem there are several impractical suggestions which may be mentioned at this point. It has been urged, for example, that large numbers of Chinese be imported as farm laborers. An enthusiastic Chamber of Commerce of a small town even urged the importation of a million Chinese as farm laborers for a single state. It is hardly necessary to discuss this proposition in the present connection further than to call attention to the fact that the shipping facilities on the Pacific are totally inadequate to transport even a million Chinese within a reasonable period of time. Furthermore Chinese are trained in a system in which labor is considered of little economic importance. They are totally unacquainted with our methods of agriculture and of course would be quite unable to understand or speak English for some time. It would therefore require an expert interpreter on every farm on which Chinese were employed. Again it has been suggested that German prisoners of war now in France, England, and Russia be transported to this country as farm laborers under military supervision. The obvious difficulties in the way of such a procedure scarcely require pointing out. Similarly, the suggestion that Belgian, Serbian, and Armenian refugees be brought to this country to help us raise food is a quite unfeasible proposition, with the present shortage of shipping facilities. Many persons have urged that our soldiers now in training camps should be utilized a portion of their time for work on farms in the vicinity of cantonments. It is merely necessary to state

that the present system of military training occupies the entire time of the men from morning to night and that the training is of a severity up to the limit of human endurance. Another suggestion which has come from various sources and has been strongly vouched for by patriotic citizens is a national conscription for farm work. The suggestion is sometimes coupled with the proposition that the government assume control of large areas of unused land and place farm labor conscripts upon such land. No practical method of solving the obvious difficulties connected with such an enterprise has thus far been pointed out.

The agricultural operations of the Southwest involve certain conditions different from those which prevail in the rest of the country. There is a large amount of work connected with the production of sugar beets in southern California and Colorado, and with the growing of Egyptian cotton in the Imperial and Salt River Valleys, which has heretofore been done mainly by Mexicans. Much of this work has to be done at a time of year when extremely high temperatures prevail. American workmen seem not to be well adapted for that kind of work. During the past season many American men and boys made an attempt in an outburst of patriotism and enthusiasm but were soon sobered by the heat. There has been and still is need of additional Mexicans to carry on this work. The sugar beet growers and citrus growers, and the cotton planters of California and Arizona, have formed associations for the purpose of importing Mexican laborers and guaranteeing their proper treatment both with regard to wages and housing conditions. The Mexican government is willing that labor should be recruited for farm service in the United States and the Department of Labor has generously granted an exception to their regulations regarding the importation of foreign labor, allowing Mexicans to be brought over for limited periods for agricultural operations exclusively. About five thousand Mexicans were imported from Mexico during the past cropping season under this arrangement, but this number does not quite offset the number of Mexicans who fled to Mexico for fear of being drawn into army service. It will be necessary, therefore, to import several thousand more during the coming season and arrangements have already been made to that end.

There appears to be a surplus of labor in Porto Rico. These laborers for the most part speak only Spanish and would therefore be particularly adapted for farm labor in Texas, New Mexico,

Arizona, and California, where a large percentage of the people speak and understand Mexican Spanish. An arrangement was made to bring 30,000 Porto Ricans into Texas to pick cotton during the past season but the drought which prevailed over western Texas made it unnecessary to bring in this outside labor. If the necessity should arise, however, Porto Ricans can doubtless be obtained for the crop season of next year in Texas and the Southwest.

A few instances may be cited of methods used in handling the farm labor situation under special conditions. As is generally known a large army of workers congregate annually for the wheat harvest in the central wheat belt. This harvest begins about June 10 in Oklahoma and extends north gradually with the ripening of the grain, ending in North Dakota about the middle of September. The harvest thus furnishes continuous employment for men for a period of about three months. The harvest army is made up of men from various economic stations in life and from a large number of states. Many college men and residents of eastern cities annually make a pilgrimage to the wheat belt to engage in this work. The Employment Service of the United States Department of Labor also directs a large number of men to localities where harvest operations are under way. The fact that such work awaits the coming of the harvest hands is generally known throughout the country. The chief way in which the Department of Agriculture can assist in this employment is in furnishing accurate information as to just where the men are needed, the number of men required, the wages offered, housing conditions, and other details concerning which laborers wish to be informed. The laborers are then directed to the proper localities where they are met by farmers and taken to the harvest fields. Definite plans have been laid whereby County Agents or others who may be brought into our organization shall keep each other informed of the time when harvest help is required in their locality and of the date when such help will be released upon completion of the work. It is expected that in this manner the laborers will be systematically directed from farm to farm as the wheat harvest progresses northward in order that they may find continuous employment throughout the season.

For the fruit and wheat harvest of Oregon there was not sufficient time to make arrangements to secure floating labor from outside the state for this year's crop. It was obviously necessary,

therefore, for the state to solve its own problem with its own man power. The Farm Help Specialist and the County Agents appealed to the urban population of Oregon for help. The appeal was met with a generous response. In many instances small towns practically adjourned all of their regular business and men and women went out to do the harvest work. A solution of the harvest help problem was found in the same manner in many localities in other states.

The idea of establishing training camps where city boys and men may receive instructions in the simple features of farm operations has gained much momentum since the outbreak of the war. The Canadian authorities have not found it necessary to establish training camps for men or boys. City residents have simply gone out individually to work on farms and the farmers have shown a reasonable amount of patience in instructing such laborers in the methods of farm work. In the United States, however, considerable attention has been given to training camps. This system has been tried with Boy Scouts, units of high-school boys, Y. M. C. A. members, the Boys' Working Reserve, and in camps financed by private enterprises. The camps have varied greatly in size and in elaborateness of organization and equipment. In some cases idle farms were given over for use as training camps, while in other cases certain farmers allowed camps to be established on their farms to furnish labor for themselves and neighboring farmers. The results obtained from the work of boys who have been trained in these camps have varied greatly. In some instances farmers complain of the inefficiency and playfulness, or even maliciousness, of boys, while in other instances the boys gave complete satisfaction and rendered excellent and effective service. The experience of last year shows clearly that success with boys' camps depends largely on having an efficient leader, a man who has not forgotten the fact that he was once himself a boy and who understands boy psychology. With such a leader the superabundant energy of young boys may easily be directed into useful channels, with the result that a great amount of good work is accomplished to the benefit of both the boys and the farmer. Under such conditions a better understanding is brought about between the farmer and the city boy and the way is paved for a still closer coöperation between these two classes of our population.

In most of these camps it has been found desirable to have a certain degree of military organization and routine. By these

means the boys are taught personal responsibility and personal hygiene, and are enabled to carry with them from the city to the farm the essential features of their own social community.

It is unfortunately impossible to give detailed statistics showing in figures the results of the operations of the Department of Agriculture in handling the farm labor problem. Thus far the men we have employed to do this work have been too busy to collect statistics covering all points connected with the work. We have hesitated to ask them to file statistical reports for fear of interfering with the urgent work of the Farm Help Specialists. We have, for example, nothing like complete statistics for any state of the number of men, boys, and women placed in farm positions as a result of our campaign. Our fragmentary statistics indicate that more than 100,000 city boys not ordinarily employed on farms worked for a considerable period during the past summer either at general farm work or in harvesting or truck-gardening work. The size of the harvest army which handles the wheat crop of the central states could not be measured with any degree of accuracy. The men who composed this army came from many sources, some as a result of advertisement by the Employment Service of the United States Department of Labor, some through the efforts of the Farm Help Specialists of the Department of Agriculture, and some as a result of newspaper propaganda or of their own initiative.

No evidence has been obtained that more men were hired on farms in 1917 than in 1916. In fact in some localities the number of hired men was actually less than during the previous year. For example, in North Dakota in twenty-four counties in which fairly complete statistics were obtained, the number of hired men in 1916 was 5900 while in 1917 it was only 5376. As already mentioned there has been a general speeding-up of farm work on the part of farmers themselves. The amount of family labor was considerably increased over that of the previous year. Women in particular did an unusual amount of farm labor.

One unfortunate result of the present economic disturbance is the fact that both the farmer and the laborer have been temporarily spoiled by high prices. The farmer complains that the laborer is asking too much for his work and the laborer in turn complains that by reason of the high prices which prevail for farm products the farmer can afford to pay higher wages and is really offering ridiculously low wages. The farmer can afford to pay

more, but the laborer must not be unreasonable. It is obviously necessary that all of us should adjust ourselves to the new conditions both of prices and of economic competition between different industries and agriculture.

The problem of farm labor is not a new one. It has always existed. The farmer has always complained of the inefficiency of the farm labor, and the laborer in turn has always complained of poor housing conditions, poor food, and bad treatment on farms. The laborer has complained most bitterly perhaps of irregularity in hours rather than the length of the day's work on the farm. He has also resented the fact that in many instances his social status is wholly anomalous and indefinable, since he appears to be neither a member of the family nor of any other recognized status. In fact he seems to feel that from the view point of the farmer he is neither flesh, fowl, nor good red herring. It is plainly necessary that both parties should get together and reach an understanding. Each must meet the other's reasonable requirements. The results shown by every conscientious effort on the part of farmers and their help to come to an understanding as to each other's rights, privileges, and social status have been a source of comforting surprise. For example, in two neighboring counties in one of the southern states the economic appeal to laborers to migrate outside the county for industrial work was equally great. In one of these counties it happened that a voluntary movement was in progress among the farmers to treat their labor with a little more consideration than had been the case, thus recognizing the desire of every man to be treated as a human being. In the other county no change was made in the traditional method of handling labor. The migration of Negroes from the latter county was very extensive while it was hardly noticeable in the former county.

The farm labor problem is a community function, requiring the hearty coöperation of urban and rural populations. The farmer's business cannot be so arranged that he can employ the same number of men continuously the year around. At harvest time, at fruit-picking time, and on other occasions there is a demand for a number of extra laborers. It is unreasonable to maintain an economic system in which a number of men lie idle for a large portion of the year merely for the purpose of performing this emergency labor at harvest time. It is far better that the city population recognize their duty as members of the community and that they adjust their business affairs so that they can go

out on the farms and do the emergency work of harvest and of other occasions requiring extra help.

The Farm Help Specialist has an extremely important and difficult function to perform. He must be a source of leaven and inspiration to bring all state and federal agencies into harmony within the state. His functions are obviously hard to define or limit, since they must be so flexible and variable in nature, depending upon the conditions existing in each state.

The results obtained in our farm labor work of the past crop season indicate that there is labor enough in the country if it is properly distributed and efficiently employed. There appears to be, in other words, no absolute shortage of labor. There are many local disturbances due to the unusual competition for labor at high wages, and in certain localities farmers have suffered for want of labor and have found it difficult to secure help in the places where they had usually found it. This, however, is no time either for pessimism or for overconfidence. The situation requires patience and above all genuinely productive work on the part of all citizens. There is urgent work for all. No one has a good excuse today for not working. There is no place in the present economic system for loafers or slackers. The situation which has developed as a result of the European war is new to all of us and many annoying local disturbances have occurred requiring much patience. Readjustments, however, are rapidly taking place. The farmer is gradually realizing that with the present prices of farm products he can pay higher wages, and in fact the country as a whole is awaking to a realization of the duty of every citizen to find a niche where he can be of most service and to perform his share of fundamental productive work. The necessity for a higher efficiency of labor and for more extensive use of labor-saving devices and cropping systems designed for the better utilization of farm labor has been too largely considered as an academic proposition. This necessity is now a condition, not a theory. The real problem before us is therefore not to find laborers in China or Timbuctoo to do our work but to do it ourselves. We are going at this problem with open eyes and open minds and with the coöperation of all classes of population we shall surely succeed.